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ABSTRACT

Researchers have called psychologists' attention to the role that client perception of the therapeutic relationship plays in therapy outcome. Past studies assessing the impact on clients of therapist age have used varied research strategies and raised several methodological issues. A study was undertaken which attempted to resolve some of these issues and address the counselor-client age issue as a determinant of counselee preferences for help. Single (N=48) and married (N=48) women, between the ages of 18 and 31, observed one therapist in videotaped simulated interviews handling three client problems varied for interpersonal intimacy. Two older women (61 and 74 years old) and two younger women (26 and 34 years old) served as counselors. Subjects then completed the Client Satisfaction Form and rated the counselor's attractiveness, expertness, and trustworthiness, using the Counselor Rating Form-Short. The results showed that younger counselors were preferred over older counselors when time management was an issue. No preferences based on counselor age were expressed for more intimate problems. Analyses of data on counselor expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness suggested that, although individual differences among counselors seemed to contribute to client satisfaction in dealing with issues of differential intimacy, chronological age did not emerge as a factor in younger, prospective clients' perceptions of counselor attributes. (NRB)

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Effects of Counselor-Client Age Similarity and Presenting Problem Intimacy on Client Satisfaction

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Abstract

In an effort to resolve previous research findings regarding the salience of counselor-client age similarity as a determinant of counselor preferences, 96 young women saw either an older or a younger counselor discussing problems varying in their intimacy level. Analyses suggested that while individual differences among counselors seemed to contribute to client satisfaction in dealing with issues of differential intimacy, chronological age did not emerge as a factor in younger prospective clients' perceptions of counselor attributes.

Effects of Counselor-Client Age Similarity and Presenting Problem Intimacy on Client Satisfaction

Researchers have called psychologists' attention to the role clients' perceptions of the therapeutic relationship plays in therapy outcome (e.g., Gurman, 1977; Strong, 1968). But as Robiner and Storandt (1983) noted, clients' perceptions may vary as a function of both the therapist and the client. Of particular interest to the present investigation was the role of counselor age on college age women. In theory, age matching could (a) lead to greater client satisfaction and have an impact on the quality of therapeutic interaction and (b) have implications for client assignment and staffing policies in university counseling centers.

Simons and Helms (1976) had female university students (age range 18 to 21) and non-students (age range 19 to 76) evaluate a photograph and description of male or female therapists. Therapists of both sexes were chosen to represent four different age groups: 25-35 years, 35-45 years, 45-55 years, and 55-65 years. College women preferred women counselors in the 35-45 and the 55-65 age ranges, whereas non-college women preferred the oldest age group. Simons and Helms (1976) findings suggested that, in the case of female counselors, women clients prefer a therapist to be older.

Simon (1973) asked college men and women to rank equally recommended therapists whom they might consult for a personal

problem. The three male and three female therapists differed in age: 25-years-old, 40-years-old, and 55-years old. The women students' first choice for a female therapist was the 40-year-old.

Lasky and Salomone (1977) presented psychiatric male inpatients of differing ages (i.e., under 30, 30-45, over 45) with color slides and 10 minute audiotape segment from a counseling session conducted by a younger (age 24) or older (age 48) therapist. Counselor status (high vs. low) was crossed over client age and counselor age. Significant three-way interaction between client age, counselor age, and counselor status indicated patients under 30 were most attracted to the younger low status therapist. No differences emerged for the patients in the 30-45 year age group. While not significant, the oldest patient group tended to prefer older therapists.

Recently Robiner and Storandt (1983) had two younger (26- and 34-year-olds) and two older (58- and 66-year-olds) counselors conduct an analogue interview with both younger (range 25-35 years old) and older (range 65-70 years old) pseudoclients. Following the interview, clients reported their perceptions of facilitative conditions (empathic understanding, congruence, level of regard, unconditionality of regard) and their satisfaction with the counselor and the interview. No differences occurred for client age or counselor age. However both young and old clients responded differentially to the

younger counselors, but not to the older counselors. In terms of satisfaction with the interview, subjects responded differentially to one of the older counselors. No evidence emerged to support an age-similarity hypothesis.

These studies assessing the impact of therapist age on clients vary in the research strategies employed. The studies relying on photographs and/or written descriptions to manipulate counselor age (Simon, 1973; Simons & Helms, 1976), suggest female clients may prefer an older therapist. However, these paradigms provide the most nondirect contact with the counselor.

Studies employing recordings of simulated therapy interviews (Lasky & Salomone, 1977) or single in vivo analogue counseling interviews (Robiner & Storandt, 1983) are more difficult to interpret. Although Lasky and Salomone (1977) used a male sample, their findings suggest that other counselor variables may interact with age in complex ways. Robiner and Storandt's (1983) results suggest that, for all-female counseling dyads, client-therapist age-similarity need not be so critical. However, females' counselors may vary in unique ways even when age is taken into account.

While research paradigms using recorded interviews control for differences between interviews (e.g., topical content, emotional fluctuations), they usually rely on a single stimulus interview thereby limiting generalizability of the findings. Robiner and Storandt's (1983) in vivo analogue strategy has some merit but was constricted to requesting volunteer clients to

discuss a "problem in a personal relationship" with the counselor. As Robiner and Storandt's counselors were paraprofessional crisis counselors from a community crisis hotline, it seems conceivable that they were trained and held expectations for dealing with critical situational problems. However, their pseudoclients might not necessarily have viewed problems in their "personal relationships" as in a critical stage. Thus seeming discrepancies in counselors' orientations and clients' perspectives might have impacted upon clients' perceptions of facilitative conditions and satisfaction.

The present study attempted to resolve some of these methodological issues and in addition addressed the counselor-client age issue as a determinant of counselee preferences for help. This investigation employed videotaped simulated interviews to provide subjects greater contact with the counselor. Additionally, subjects observed the same counselor conducting three interviews. In each interview, a different client role-played a problem. The three role-played vignettes were known to vary in terms of the intimacy of the client's concerns. Thus subjects observed one therapist handle a range of client problems. Since subjects might identify differentially with role-played client problems depending upon subjects' marital status, subjects' marital status was also controlled.

The major purpose of this investigation was to determine whether subjects perceive younger vs. older counselor

differentially in terms of therapist attributes (trustworthiness, expertness, attractiveness) and in terms of satisfaction with the counselor. Secondarily, the study looked at the impact of subjects marital status and the interpersonal intimacy level of the role-played client's problems.

Method

Subjects

Forty-eight married and 48 unmarried volunteer women (M = 19.2 years, range = 18-31) were recruited to serve as pseudoclients. These women lived in or close to a large metropolitan area in the southwest and/or attended a large southwestern university.

Dependent Measures

Subjects rated counselors' attractiveness, expertness, and trustworthiness using Corrigan and Schmidt's (1983) Counselor Rating Form-Short (CRF-S), which is an adaptation of Barak and LaCrosse's (1975) Counselor Rating Form. Corrigan and Schmidt (1983) reported subscale reliabilities ranging from .82 to .93 which were judged sufficiently adequate to allow use of the CRF-S. High scores on the CRF-S suggest greater positive degrees of the three counselor attributes.

Ashby, Ford, Guerney, and Guerney's (1957) Client Satisfaction Form (CSF) served as the other dependent variable. The CSF consists of 25 positively and negatively phrased items designed to assess the client's satisfaction with the counselor and the interview. Robiner and Storandt (1983) reported a

reliability of .92 for the CSF. Higher CSF scores indicate greater client satisfaction.

Videotape Stimuli

Three 10-12 minute scripts were adapted from actual interviews. The excerpts were edited so that they varied in regard to the interpersonal intimacy of the client's presenting problem.

Neutral topic (NEU). In the NEU vignette the female client discussed managing her time e.g., transportation problems, academic progress, and part-time employment.

Mild topic (MIL). The client in the MIL excerpt explored relationship issues involving breaking away from her parents, communication problems with her boyfriend, and trying to find more interpersonal satisfaction in her personal relationships.

Intense topic (INT). In this scenario, the client focused on sexual relationships, suitableness of a marital partnership, birth control, and a past abortion.

An independent sample of 12 women read and rated the three scripts, in counterbalanced order, in terms of: (a) how intimate they considered the problem presented by the client, (b) how difficult it would be for a woman to discuss the problem with a counselor, and (c) how common the problem was among women they knew. Analysis of these ratings confirmed that they were perceived differentially and seemed to fit along a dimension conceptualized as intimacy of the client's problem. Two older

women (61 and 74 years old) and two younger women (26 and 34 years old) served as counselors. One older woman was a Ph.D. psychologist and one was an experienced actress. Both younger counselors were Ph.D. candidates with counseling practicum experience. One of five different women (20, 22, 26, 28, and 31 years old) role-played the client in each script.

All vignettes were taped so that the seated counselor was visible from the waist up, while the client remained off camera. The final taped stimulus vignettes were judged comparable in technical quality and realism by two Ph.D. psychologists.

Procedure

Upon arrival, each subject completed the biographical information sheet. A female experimenter then gave a brief explanation that the three vignette sequence represented excerpts from sessions between the counselor and three different clients and were being used with the permission of both the counselor and the clients.

Each subject then viewed a three vignette sequence conducted by the same counselor. Presentation of the NEU, MIL, and INT vignettes were counterbalanced across subjects to control for possible confounding due to ordering effects.

Before viewing each vignette, subjects were instructed to place themselves in the client's place and to focus on how they would feel discussing the problem with a counselor. After viewing each vignette subjects completed the CRF-S and CSF and indicated how easy it was for them to identify with the "client".

The final 2 X 2 X 3 design included two levels of counselor age (older vs. younger) and two levels of subject marital status (married vs. unmarried) as between subjects factors. The third factor of problem intimacy (NEU vs. MIL vs. INT) was treated as a within subjects factor. Two counselors were nested under each level of counselor age.

Results and Discussion

Data were analyzed via a 2(marital status [married-single]) X 2(counselor age [young-old]) (with counselors [2] nested within each level of counselor age) repeated measures (3 levels of intimacy) analysis of variance. All analyses were based on cell sizes of 12.

Preliminary analyses yielded no main effects for or interactions with marital status; data were subsequently collapsed across marital status to yield a 2(counselor age) (with counselors as a nested factor) X 3 repeated measures ANOVA.

As a manipulation check, analyses of script ratings yielded a main effect for intimacy level for the rated intimacy level of the scripts, $F_{2,88} = 217.51$, $p < .001$, favoring sexuality, with time management being rated the least intimate. There was additionally a main effect for counselors, $F_{2,89} = 6.32$, $p < .01$, across both levels of counselor age. For rated difficulty in discussing the issues dealt with in each script, only the main effect for topic (sexuality the most difficult, time management the least), $F_{2,89} = 184.66$, $p < .001$, was significant. For

pervasiveness (extent of the problem, intimacy level effects were significant, $F_{2,90} = 7.19$, $p < .001$, with time management being seen as the most common relative to relationships/sexuality. For rated ease with which the subject could identify with the "client", intimacy level (favoring time management, then relationships, then sexuality) was significant, $F_{2,90} = 24.54$, $p < .001$. For rated personalness of the problem, again main effects for counselor $F_{2,90} = 4.68$, $p < .05$, and for intimacy level (favoring sexuality), $F_{2,89} = 233.01$, $p < .001$, were obtained. These findings clearly suggested that the videotaped scripts were perceived to be differentially intimate/personal, with sexuality, relationships with significant others, and time management being judged as most to least intimate, in that order. There is also some (albeit less strong) evidence that the rated intimacy of the scripts was affected by individual differences among the counselors, perhaps due to differences in eye contact, verbal pace, voice tone, etc., although this is speculative. When data were collapsed across counselors within levels of counselor age, findings were identical regarding intimacy level differences.

For the counselor variables, a similar lack of marital status effects was obtained; subsequent analyses involved data summed across marital status. For the Client Satisfaction Form, a main effect for counselors (nested within counselor age) was significant, $F_{2,89} = 3.35$, $p < .05$, as was intimacy level (with counselors being seen more positively regarding dealing with time

management ($\bar{X}$ = 122), versus relationship difficulties ($\bar{X}$ = 116), versus sexuality ($\bar{X}$ = 108). Moreover, a counselor (within counselor age) by intimacy level interaction was obtained, $F_{4,176} = 5.27$, $p < .001$, suggesting the individual counselors (regardless of age) were perceived more positively in dealing with more intimate topics versus others. When these data were collapsed across counselors main effect for topic (intimacy level) was again found, $F_{2,90} = 8.46$, $p < .001$), and a significant counselor age by intimacy level interaction was obtained, $F_{2,90} = 3.12$, $p < .05$, indicating that younger counselors were preferred over older counselors when time management was an issue, while no preferences based on counselor age were expressed with problems in the areas of interpersonal relationships and sex were dealt with. These findings are noteworthy in that older counselors may be seen as either incapable of managing theirs (or others lives) or as not being able to understand/cope with balancing school vs. work vs. family because these issues are not seen as salient ones in the lives of elderly persons. More importantly, older counselors are seen as no less preferable in dealing with more intimate topics, presumably because these issues are universal ones. Given the biases often held about the aged as being void of sexual interests, it is especially noteworthy to see an absence of this bias in this sample. Perhaps their contacts with older parents/grandparents regarding these issues have predisposed them

to see older would-be counselors in a more positive light.

For the Counselor Rating Form factor of Expertness, main effects for counselor, $F_{2,90} = 4.59$, $p < .05$, and for intimacy level, $F_{2,89} = 4.07$, $p < .02$, were obtained (favoring sexuality relative to time management/relationships). Additionally, a significant counselor (irrespective of age) by intimacy level interaction was obtained $F_{4,178} = 3.76$, $p < .01$, indicating that some counselors were seen as more expert in some areas versus other counselors. Collapsing across counselors, topic effects were again obtained $F_{2,91} = 3.78$, $p < .05$, and the counselor age X intimacy level interaction approached significance, $F_{2,91} = 2.29$, $p = .11$.

For Attractiveness, again counselor effects were significant, $F_{2,89} = 3.70$, $p < .05$, as was intimacy level, $F_{2,88} = 6.92$, $p < .01$ (favoring time management, relationships, and sexuality in that order). Moreover the counselor by intimacy level interaction was significant, $F_{4,178} = 6.37$, $p < .001$. Data collapsed across counselors yielded intimacy effects, $F_{2,90} = 5.67$, $p < .01$. These findings parallel those for Expertness.

For Trustworthiness, main effects for intimacy were found, $F_{2,89} = 6.01$, $p < .01$ (favoring time management) as was a counselor by intimacy interaction, $F_{4,178} = 4.07$, $p < .001$. Collapsed across counselors intimacy, effects were again found, $F_{2,90} = 5.67$, $p < .01$. As above, these findings parallel those for Expertness.

These counselor data substantiate the importance of individual counselor differences within contexts varying in their intimacy content as a determinant of counselor preferences among would-be younger clients. More importantly, they explicitly reject the notion of therapist-client matches based on age, as these matches affect both the approachability of older versus younger counselors, or generalizations about older counselors being seen as less competent/attractive by the younger persons. Both sets of findings are consistent with those of Robiner and Storandt (1983). From a gerontological perspective, they suggest older persons to be seen in equally positive terms in their perceived ability to deal with issues relevant to younger clients.

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Table 1

Means and SD's for the Major Dependent Variables

Variable		Young Counselor						Old Counselor					
		A			B			C			D		
		1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
Intimacy	M	2.17	3.82	4.95	1.73	3.56	4.39	2.26	3.86	4.82	1.66	3.75	4.45
	SD	1.07	.88	.20	.91	1.07	1.15	.96	.81	.38	.70	.67	.97
Difficulty	M	1.58	3.20	3.91	1.45	2.91	3.45	1.65	2.95	4.04	1.34	2.56	4.00
	SD	.92	1.17	1.01	.77	1.13	1.10	.83	1.33	.92	.57	1.03	.95
Pervasiveness	M	4.25	3.54	3.20	3.54	3.12	3.58	3.56	3.13	3.30	3.54	3.08	3.45
	SD	.79	.98	1.31	.78	.90	1.13	.99	1.21	1.25	.72	1.01	1.14
Ease	M	4.20	3.04	2.70	3.54	3.00	2.95	4.08	3.17	2.91	3.91	3.25	3.20
	SD	.93	.99	1.19	1.14	1.14	1.19	.73	1.13	1.31	.88	.98	1.20
Problem	M	2.33	3.87	4.83	1.86	3.69	4.17	2.08	3.73	4.78	1.87	3.58	4.58
	SD	1.04	.61	.38	.91	.97	1.23	.84	.86	.51	.85	.82	.58
Client Satisfaction	M	140.70	120.41	106.08	119.26	111.08	110.52	133.27	118.36	109.77	96.04	116.17	104.67
	SD	16.69	31.74	30.41	21.77	29.87	33.50	25.25	28.31	29.22	37.72	28.60	26.40
Expertness	M	21.91	19.70	17.04	18.25	17.70	17.62	21.54	20.31	18.81	15.29	18.29	17.29
	SD	2.55	5.60	5.75	4.51	4.99	5.33	4.62	4.97	5.64	7.17	5.72	4.92
Attractiveness	M	22.75	18.45	17.29	18.62	18.83	18.08	22.47	19.00	19.04	15.91	17.70	17.29
	SD	3.42	6.15	6.17	4.24	4.89	4.66	3.74	5.02	5.08	5.64	5.94	4.10
Trustworthiness	M	23.29	21.25	19.20	20.29	19.87	19.41	22.59	21.00	20.45	18.45	20.25	19.41
	SD	2.29	4.55	4.80	3.35	4.13	4.04	3.54	4.11	4.03	5.44	5.12	4.96